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ABSTRACT

This document asks whether a stress situation created in an organization could be controlled and used to influence the decisionmaking process. The hypothesis tested was that stress induced intentionally by a change agent in a target agency, with consequent generation of strain between the actors of the organizational, would result in the development of new goal orientations. The study, conducted in a poor rural southern county, attempted to discover the nature of the dysfunctional forces at work in the county which prevented the target agency directors in rural areas from participating in the federally funded programs, how the change agent manipulated the disruption variable of stress-strain within the target agencies, and the effect of this manipulation on the organization. Study findings revealed that the reluctance of staff to take on a secondary mission which might end in an unfavorable evaluation, a lack of expectations and directives from the State level regarding such an activity, a lack of knowledge, and a lack of leadership accounted for the failure of agency directors to apply for federal project money. Additionally, the change agent exploited the relationship between the State department parent agency and the local target agency to create an expectation. The result was the generation of strain in the relationship of the two actors which led ultimately to the desired decision in the target agency. (Author/DN)

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Variables of Disruption and Organizational Change

Modern sociological theorists in their study of stability and change have become increasingly conscious of the significant part played in the change process by variables of disruption such as: conflict, tension, and stress-strain. A great deal of attention is being given to the means by which disruptions force an organization from a stable to a dynamic state of equilibrium. "The key concept," Merton states, "bridging the gap between statics and dynamics in functional theory is that of strain, tension, contradiction, or discrepancy between the component elements of social and cultural structure. Such strains may be dysfunctional for the social system in its then existing form; they may also be instrumental in leading to changes in that system. In any case, they exert pressure for change."[1]

If one accepts the argument that stress, as a disruptive variable, is a major initiator of organizational change, then a logical question is: can stress be injected intentionally into an organization and controlled to the extent that planned and directed change can take place? The literature is unfortunately silent on this issue. Merton, though, points out the need for basic inquiry into this subject by stating that ". . . strains are not alone in making for change in a social structure, but they do represent a theoretically strategic source of change which has yet to be the object of sufficiently sustained and cumulative sociological research."[2]

Decision-making is an integral part of the process of change. The writers elected to test the question of whether a stress situation created in an organization could be controlled and used to influence the decision-

making process. Within the framework of a general hypothesis that there is a relationship between stress-strain and decision-making, an interim hypothesis was formulated:

> Stress induced intentionally by a change agent in a target agency, with consequent generation of strain between the actors of the organization, will result in the development of new goal orientations.

"Stress" refers to differing interpretations between members of the same organization on goals or the means which should be utilized to achieve goals. "Strain" is the behavioral manifestation of a stress situation.[3] "New goal orientation" refers to the adoption of a new objective via a specific decision.

Setting of the Study

This study took place in the Southwestern part of the United States in one of three economically deprived, rural counties selected by the Department of Agriculture for an experiment utilizing the Change Agent concept. The county will be referred to as Pobre County. It was one of the 100 poorest counties in the United States, with a population of approximately 17,000 and a per capita income of $1,030. In 1968, when this study took place, the rate of unemployment was placed at 11.6%.

Pobre County was selected for the Department of Agriculture's Change Agent experiment because it represented a typical pattern that had been identified in rural poor counties throughout the nation. Federal Project funds were flowing almost exclusively into urban areas at the expense of rural areas. This was the case even though the same federal, state and local organizations which could apply for and receive federal monies were present in both urban and rural areas, for example: Public Schools, Departments of Public Welfare, County Commissions, and the like. In rural

areas unidentified dysfunctional forces were rendering these organizations inactive (in terms of sponsoring federal projects.)

Searching for a way to counteract the trend, and still not violate the maxim of local and state control over development projects, the Department of Agriculture placed a Change Agent in Pobre County. The Change Agent was placed in what can be thought of as a classical role. He had no authority over any of the organizations with which he was to deal. He had no federal funds with which to work; even his salary was paid by the State Department of Vocational Education. He worked out of a barren, two room office with only the support of two secretaries. The mission of the Change Agent was to manipulate the federal, state and local target agencies in such a way as to induce them to sponsor federally funded projects.

Strategy of the Study

The writers, in the role of participant-observers, spent approximately one year visiting the county. They attended meetings, reviewed correspondence, and interviewed virtually all of the members of the leadership structure of the county (as defined by a power study). The writers set out to determine, in brief: (1) What was the nature of the dysfunctional forces at work in the county which prevented the target agency directors in rural areas from participating in the federally funded programs? (2) How was the Change Agent manipulating the disruption variable of stress-strain within the target agencies? and (3) What was the effect of this manipulation on the organizations?

The technique of analysis utilized in this study was based on qualitative rather than quantitative measures. Quantitative strategies can be very effective in demonstrating accomplishing changes, but often fail in

their attempts to explain the process of change. The participant-observer approach permits the gathering of data on a day-to-day basis, thus giving the observer a close view across time of the alterations in the patterned interaction of an organization.[4]

The writers observed the Change Agent manipulating several target agencies, i.e. injecting a stress situation, but for the sake of clarity and brevity, only one typical case will be reported. The target agency in question was one of many county branches of a state organization. The target agency in Pobre County had a county director and a staff of about ten people. The county director reported directly to the state supervisor who had an office in the state capitol.

The target agency in Pobre County had the capability of managing federally funded projects which would have the effect of injecting many thousands of dollars into the local, depressed economy as well as providing a variety of training programs for the "hard core" unemployed. Leading up to the arrival of the Change Agent, the target agency had neither applied for nor used any appreciable amount of federal project money. For as long as anyone could remember, the organization had not altered its normal patterns of activity. The primary mission of the target agency was being carried out faithfully, and no one within the organization had given much thought to altering the traditional patterns by adopting the secondary mission of sponsoring a federally funded project. This organization was, to say the least, typical of what the writers found in Pobre County.

Dysfunctional Forces in a Rural County

The writers found five dysfunctional forces that tended to prevent the directors of rural organizations such as the one described from applying for federal project money. They are, in brief:

1. A reluctance on the part of the county agency directors to take on a secondary mission which might end in an unfavorable evaluation. Every federal, state and local organization has a primary mission which is defined by law or by policy. The Department of Health administers health cases, the public school educates the young, the Soil Conservation Services provides technical assistance in agriculture, and so forth. These primary missions do not include participation in Federal Projects; any agency which elected to participate would be adopting a secondary mission.

   The directors of agencies in Pobre County were evaluated on the conduct of their primary mission. The acceptance of Federal Project money means that an gency director is willing to be evaluated on a new and unfamiliar program. The prospect of the evaluation frightens many directors because they feel the results will reflect negatively on their primary mission.

2. A lack of expectations and directives on the part of the state level department parent organizations to the effect that county level organizations should attempt to obtain federal funds for project development. The writers found no county level agency directors who reported that a supervisor at the state level had ever asked them to apply for federal funds. County level directors tended to feel no expectation that their state supervisors wanted them to sponsor federally funded projects.

3. A feeling on the part of the county organizations that the administration of federal projects would only mean more work and a diversion of time from their primary missions. No material rewards and few psychological rewards are offered to an agency director who chooses to sponsor a program.

4. Gaps in the government's communication network which prevents county organizations from finding out about available federal funds. Those rural organizations which might be willing to sponsor a program often never hear about available money.

5. A lack of leaders with high status who have access to high ranking government officials. Outside of the school system and the few local government offices, no highly educated people reside in Pobre County. All of the local government positions, with the exception of one, are held by truck drivers, store owners, merchants, small ranchers, and the like. In short, a professional void exists. The local government personnel lacks the expertise necessary to mount their own effort to obtain federal money, and they do not have the funds to hire outside consultants to do the job.

Stress-Strain

The second major question raised in the strategy of the study was: How was the Change Agent manipulating the variable of stress-strain within the target agency? That is, how was he using this variable of disruption in his attempt to overcome the dysfunctional forces which tended to reinforce a steady state of equilibrium within the organization?

Bertrand defines the variable of stress-strain in an organizational framework:

> "To the extent that there are differences in interpretation which are translated into action patterns, the system undergoes stress . . . Strain is a behavioral manifestation which cannot be separated from its source of stress. It relates to the degree of control which the given individual or group exercise over their tendency to deviate from norms because of role conflict. . ."[5]

The Strategy of the Change Agent

In terms of the case study, the important point to consider is the interpretation of the task of the target agency director in Pobre County as seen by the incumbent and as seen by his supervisor in the state capitol. On a trip to Washington, the Change Agent learned of the availability of federal funds for which the target agency could qualify. The program was to provide job skills for the "hard core" unemployed.

The Change Agent knew he would meet resistance from the target agency director, so he announced his idea in a way that would answer most of the questions before they could be asked. The Change Agent proceeded by: presenting conclusive proof that the agency qualified for the funds, promising that he would help prepare the technical aspects of the proposal, and providing a general outline of a plan of operations that could be put into effect once the project was funded.

"I had trouble selling him on the idea," the Change Agent said. "When I met with the staff I found that their main concern was the extra work and the time it would take from their regular jobs." For several weeks informal meetings were held with the staff. No progress was made toward their acceptance of the Change Agent's idea. The target organization was still unwilling to make the decision to apply for federal project funds.

Federal programs are structured in such a way that few rewards other than personal satisfaction are offered to project initiators. The members of the agency were already deriving personal satisfaction out of conducting their primary missions efficiently. The Change Agent could not threaten any form of punishment because in doing so he would lose his rapport immediately. "You can't pressure these people too much or they will never talk to you again," he said.

The vulnerable spot that the Change Agent exploited was the relationship between the state department parent agency and the local target agency. The parent agency had no expectation that the local target agency should adopt a secondary mission. By initiating a stress-strain situation between the two systems, a chain of events began which led to a major decision by the target agency.

The Change Agent was legitimized by the nature of his role to visit the parent agency supervisor at the state capitol. To do this without the knowledge and consent of the director of the local target agency would have been a threatening gesture. The Change Agent said, "After weeks of pushing the idea with him [the target agency director], he said that he couldn't do anything on his own. He said I'd have to see his boss at the capitol." This was a significant remark on the part of the target agency

director. It implied that he had run out of arguments, or patience, and was, perhaps unwittingly, authorizing the Change Agent to see the supervisor of the agency. The Change Agent now could continue to work from within the organization and would not lose his rapport with the target agency director by going over his head.

The Change Agent found that members of the parent organization in the state capitol did not know much about the substantive area related to the proposal for federal funds or the technical aspects of proposal writing. They knew that federal money was available, but hadn't studied the situation sufficiently to determine how the money could best be used.

The Change Agent presented to the supervisor, just as he had done with the target agency director, conclusive evidence that the agency qualified for the federal money. The more the Change Agent refined the prospects of the program for the supervisor, the more interested the supervisor became. The supervisor thought that the idea of the Change Agent had promise, and he said he would talk to the director of the target agency. The Change Agent reported, "He would never order the [target agency] director to get into this thing; they don't work that way. The decision to adopt a secondary mission has to be made at the local level."

The writers feel this was the turning point in the efforts of the Change Agent to induce the target agency to make the decision to adopt a secondary mission. A stress situation had been interjected between the supervisor in the state capitol and the county target agency director. The writers believe that the state supervisor was interested in the program because he would not have to do the extra work -- the target agency would. The supervisor was also in a position to deny responsibility if the project failed, or claim leadership if the project succeeded.

As the state supervisor began to discuss the prospects of administering a federal project with the local target agency director, a strain began to develop in their relationship. The strain felt by the target agency director existed because for the first time he felt the supervisor expected him to adopt the secondary mission. Whereas, at one time the state supervisor and the target agency director agreed on the task of the target agency director, they no longer did. The supervisor felt the target agency director ought to pursue the federal funds to support a secondary mission, and the target agency director did not want to do so.

It should be remembered that at no time did the supervisor ask the target agency director to submit a proposal, but the target agency director sensed the expectation. "My [state supervisor] became interested in his [the Change Agent's] idea," the director reported, " and the three of us worked out a plan. At first I wasn't very comfortable with the idea, but later on I saw that it was a good thing." The decision was made to submit a project proposal, and the target agency director was the one who made that decision. When the writers asked the director if his [state supervisor] had made the decision to submit a proposal for federal funds, the director stated, "No, -- I did." The director was not aware that his decision -- one which he had opposed -- had been the final step of a sophisticated strategy planned by the Change Agent.

The third major question proposed in the strategy of the study was, in brief: What was the effect of the manipulation of a variable of disruption on the target agency? The effect of the manipulation was a decision on the part of the local target agency to pursue federal funds for a training program.

The Change Agent helped the target agency staff prepare for their new obligations. Regular workshop-type sessions were held. The Change Agent also wrote a large part of the proposal, utilizing expertise that was not available to the state supervisor or the target agency director. "They didn't know enough about labor codes, building materials, and training techniques to write the proposal themselves," the Change Agent said. The strain situation and the resulting tensions had been reduced because the state supervisor and the target agency director now had a similar definition of the task of the target agency director, with reference to the secondary mission.

Conclusion

In terms of the interim hypothesis, the writers conclude that simply interjecting stress between all the actors of an organization will not guide the organization toward making the desired decisions. A random, as opposed to specific, interjection of stress will generate strain between individual staff members and the necessary intra-organizational coordination will be jeopardized.

The writers found that the Change Agent interjected stress between specific members of the organization. The stress was interjected between the director of the target agency and the state supervisor of the parent system. The result was the generation of strain in the realtionship of the two actors which led ultimately to a specific decision in the target agency. The decision made was the one which the Change Agent wanted to induce.

Because decision-making is an integral part of the process of change, the findings reported on in this study lend weight to Merton's contention that strain is a potential source of organizational change. In addition,

this study suggests that strain can be deliberately manipulated in such a way as to give direction to the decision-making process.

FOOTNOTES

1. Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, New York: The Free Press, 1957, pp. 122-123.

2. Ibid., p. 123.

3. Alvin L. Bertrand, "The Stress-Strain Elements of Social Systems," Social Forces, 42 (October, 1963), pp 1-9.

4. Howard S. Becker, "Problems of Inference and Proof," American Sociological Review, 23 (December, 1958), p. 652.

5. Alvin S. Bertrand, Basic Sociology: An Introduction to Theory and Method, New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1967, pp. 31-32.